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Postfeminist “Islamophobia”: The Middle East is so 1980s in *Sex and the City: The Movie 2*

Towards the end of *Sex and the City: The Movie 2* (hereafter *SATC2*), Carrie and her girlfriends find themselves in a spice souk in Abu Dhabi where Arab men are trying to persuade them to buy knock-off (presumably stolen) designer goods. Charlotte is interested in a Rolex watch and says to Carrie that it’s exactly like the wrist watch Carrie bought for Big earlier in the film. Carrie dismisses Charlotte’s watch by saying ‘Eh – no – mine was *vintage*.’ The implication is that the Abu Dhabi watch is not “vintage” but rather something that’s only 20 – 30 years old and therefore coded as “dated”.

This article will consider how *SATC2* sets up a binary between style which is coded as “vintage” and, therefore, desirable and items / fashion which are represented as “dated” and identified as bad taste. Although this has been a dominant motif in both the *SATC* series and first film, where *SATC2* ventures into very offensive territories is that it maps this distinction onto a West / Middle East binary. While everything Western (or, more precisely, everything NYC) is represented as stylish, everything in the Middle East (and here it is Abu Dhabi which stands in for the Middle East) is depicted as dated and, the film suggests, trapped in the decade of the 1980s. In doing so, *SATC2* develops many of the prejudices found in contemporary Western representations of the Middle East but articulates these through a focus on fashion, consumerism and female sexuality. *SATC2*’s brand of postfeminism depends upon an alignment between female sexual desire, desirability and knowing (often ironic) consumption of fashion. This is contrasted with Abu Dhabi’s lack of sophistication in sexual identification, sexual self-expression and awareness of fashion and style.

This discussion is *not* attempting to debate whether Muslim women actually *are* oppressed by the regimes of Abu Dhabi and the Middle East. Instead, it is arguing that *SATC2* is highly offensive in the way it suggests that feminine “liberation” in the Middle East may be attained through an engagement with Western fashion and the adoption of *SATC*’s particular brand of postfeminist sensibility. In other words, the film conflates all the social, cultural, political and, most importantly, *religious* differences that exist between secular New York and Muslim Abu Dhabi and reduces all of these issues to a simple question of style and knowing consumerism. Throughout the article, “islamophobia” will be used in quotation marks as, strictly speaking, *SATC2* is not articulating ‘a dread or hatred of Islam and therefore a fear or dislike of Muslims’ (Sheridan 2006: 317 see also Halliday 2010). Instead, the article is proposing that what is so offensive about *SATC2* is its continual slippage between a critique of the Arab characteristics of Abu Dhabi and an anxiety about its Muslim identity – all of which are reduced to a simplistic issue of style in which the UAE is dismissed as dated and trapped in the 1980s.

This argument will attempt to consider a number of issues. First, it will review the critical writing on *SATC* and situate *SATC2* within these debates. It will then consider *SATC*’s

particular brand of “islamophobia” by analyzing the film’s representation of the Muslim tradition of veiling and then discuss how *SATC2* codes the UAE as trapped in a 1980s timewarp.

***Sex and the City’s* brand of Cocktails-and-Manolos Postfeminism**

SATC (the television series) has received considerable attention from scholars interested in the representation of gender and sexuality in contemporary media (Cramer 2007; Thornham and Purvis 2005; Tropp 2006). The series has been read as indicative of a particular type of postfeminism which focuses on the lives of upper-middle class, heterosexually-identified, whiteⁱ women who are fortunate enough to live in the post patriarchal “paradise” of Manhattan where women are not only desired objects but desiring subjects. The series places great emphasis on choice: a women’s freedom to choose her individual life path. However, this “choice” is usually signified by consumption of luxury fashion items (notably a particular brand of designer shoes) and the freedom to engage in casual sex. Like most postfeminist representations, *SATC* acknowledges the achievements of second wave feminism but suggests that there is no longer any necessity to engage with these politics.

Critical considerations of the series have ranged from discussions of how the show can be termed “‘quality’ postfeminism’ (Negra 2004), not only because of its high production values but because of its ironic, self-awareness of its particular paradigm of postfeminism, to analyses of how the show challenges hegemonic masculinities (Brunner 2010). In a similar vein, critics have praised a camp sensibility in *SATC* and other contemporary postfeminist dramas (Jermyn 2009: 31; Richardson 2006).

SATC2 tries to develop many of the key themes evidenced in the original series. While one of the dominant motifs of the television show was the way it queered or camped heteronormativity (see Jermyn 2009: 25; Richardson, Smith and Werndly 2013) *SATC2* attempts to continue this through its heavy-handed affirmation that there are different types of marriages, ranging from the gay marriage of Stanford and Anthony to the childless (days “off” during the week) marriage of Big and Carrie. This queering of heteronormativity is also apparent in the importance *SATC* places on female friendship (Gerhard 2005; Handyside 2007), in which the women’s support for one another is deemed more important than their heterosexual relationships with men. *SATC2* re-affirms this when Samantha passes up the opportunity to have sex with her hot Danish architect with a proclamation that she and the girls are soulmates and nothing – men, husbands, babies - will disturb her time with her girlfriends. Similarly, an earlier sequence stressed the importance of female friendship when a red carpet fashion disaster (Samantha is wearing the same dress as 19 year old Miley Cyrus) is averted by Cyrus’s gesture of sisterhood. Carrie’s voice-over asserts that sometimes ‘a girlfriend is a girl you’ve never met’. Indeed, it is this theme of ‘a girlfriend is a girl you’ve never met’ that underpins the entire narrative of *SATC2*. The “happy ending” of the film, is the realization that the women of Abu Dhabi are, despite earlier suggestions, really girlfriends of the *SATC* women

and, of course, this friendship is suggested by a shared love of Western fashion (see next section).

The motif of orality (Jermyn 2009: 47) in which these unruly SATC women (despite their sylph-like figures) are represented as eating copious amounts of food in public places and talking loudly about their personal issues is, of course, developed in SATC2 and this time Carrie and her girlfriends even sing in public, proclaiming their own brand of ironic postfeminism through a karaoke version of *I am woman* (see next section). The food motif also serves to distinguish the UAE from the US as the Arabic coffee offered to Carrie and her friends as a welcome to the hotel is represented as unpalatable. Indeed, US fast food is represented as so much more desirable than Arabic cuisine that greasy French fries are the order of choice for a veiled Muslim women who, unlike Carrie and her friends, is represented as struggling to eat in public due to her niqab. In fact, US nutrition is deemed to be such fine repast that the airline even offers “Arabic Pringles”.

However, the “Arabic Pringles” symbolizes the dominant theme that underpins SATC2. In her much quoted essay ‘It’s either fake or foreign’, Fiona Handyside (2007) analyzed how SATC’s celebration of New York City (or, more precisely, Manhattan) continues the modernist (and Hollywood) tradition of exalting the metropolitan city as a space of liberation for minority groups – especially women. In SATC the city is coded, not in its usual guise as masculine and aggressive, but as feminine (Handyside 2007: 408) where Carrie can assume the role of a flaneuse, strolling the streets without any threat to her personal safety (see also Richards 2003). Therefore, when Carrie and her friends leave the sanctuary of New York they find a world in which everything is either fake (the trip to Los Angeles in series 3) or foreign (Paris is depicted as an incomprehensible place in series 6). What SATC2 argues is that Abu Dhabi is not only foreign *but also* fake in that this foreign culture is trying to emulate New York style. Yet, unlike Manhattan, Abu Dhabi lacks the necessary irony and sophistication required to consume this culture. In short, SATC2 suggests that Abu Dhabi may well be attempting to be this city of ‘style’ (as Sheikh Khalid calls it) but it only manages to reach the level of 1980s culture. I want to analyze this in more detail later in the article but first I want to contextualize SATC2 within the tradition of Hollywood representations of Arabs and Arab cultures.

From Hollywood’s *Evil Arabs* to SATC2’s Postfeminist “Islamophobia”

Film reviewers were extremely critical of SATC2 and many condemned the film for its recirculation of Arab stereotypes.ⁱⁱ However, while the film’s ideology is extremely offensive, it should be noted that negative representations of the Middle East and Arab culture are standard fare in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Tim Jon Semmerling (2006) and Jack Shaheen (2009) have performed detailed analyses of the ways in which a variety of Hollywood genres vilify Arabic culture - especially Arab masculinity. Semmerling charts how Hollywood cinema has responded to a variety of assumed and actual threats from the Middle East (ranging from oil

crises of the 1970s to the more contemporary Iraq war) by coding Arab characters as dangerous, treacherous and sometimes even the incarnation of pure demonic evil. For example, in his nuanced reading of the horror classic *The Exorcist*, Semmerling argues that the extended Iraq prologue does not simply establish the chorus of hellish sounds, which are then reproduced in the Georgetown possession sequences, but is affirming that 'the demon is recognizable as the "evil" Arab', thus setting up an 'Orientalist-imagined struggle between an Eastern bogeyman (the Arab demon) and the Western hero (the exorcist)' (2006: 30).

To be fair, *SATC2* does *not* simply replicate the existing Arab stereotypes found in other Hollywood films. For example, there are no incompetent Arab terrorists in *SATC2*; no lascivious Arab men lusting after blonde American women and the stereotype of the miserly, money-grabbing Arab is actually challenged by *SATC2* through its representation of generous Sheikh Khalid. Instead, *SATC2* filters Orientalist fear through issues of fashion and female heterosexual activity so that in Carrie's world of cocktails-and-Manolos feminism, the Middle East commits the ultimate crime of constricting fashion and sexual expression.

It has hardly remarkable that a key representation in this is the anonymous figure of the veiled Muslim woman. Indeed, if there is one image that Western audiences perceive as the ultimate symbol of oppression in Islamic states then it is the representation of the veiled female body (see Watson 1994: 153). In 2004 an image of the Statue of Liberty, photoshopped to show her wearing a veil and carrying a copy of the Qur'an, provoked a huge amount of controversy.ⁱⁱⁱ The image seemed to be asking, is liberty possible when the female body is forced to wear the veil? Although these representations have acquired a new importance post 9/11, these anxieties have always been in circulation in Western discourses so that the "oppression" of Muslim women is often used as *the* justification of Islamophobia and the "emancipation" of these women is frequently cited as a reason for Western military action against Middle Eastern states.

Veiling, however, is a highly complex and sensitive issue which is often difficult for secular Western cultures to comprehend. This is evidenced even by problems of linguistic translation in that English offers only the word "veil" but Arabic has several different terms to describe nuanced variations in the practice of veiling. In the history of Western considerations of veiling, it does seem that there have been two traditions. The first is the popular perception (described already) which views veiling as the supreme symbol of Muslim culture's oppression of women. This is the representation which is found in most Western popular discourses in which there is a conflation between the tradition of veiling and acts of violence that have been performed against women in Muslim culture. In this reductive equation, veiling symbolizes the marital and social abuse which *may* be happening to Muslim women. Such representations proclaim that Islam is not merely unsophisticated but downright barbaric and savage. (It's also worth noting that such representations often have little *genuine* concern for the plight of Muslim women but are simply using them as an illustration of the barbarism of Islam.)

The second tradition is the scholarship that has been developed by Western (second wave) feminists who have shifted the critique to argue that the problem is not simply Islam but *all* fundamentalist religion (Ahmed 1992, Hessini 1994, Keddie 1991, Macdonald 2006). Myra Macdonald argues that although Islam tends to attract particular criticism for its women's rights, this charge could also be made against *all* fundamentalist religions (Macdonald 2006). Arguably, the western spectator's anxiety, when he/she sees the veiled Muslim woman, is that this image denotes how oppressive *all* religious orders can be – especially in relation to women's liberty and socio-economic empowerment.

Indeed, Western feminism has questioned where, why and how the tradition of veiling became an element within the religion of Islam. Dima Dabbous (2006), for example, points out that, arguably, there is no teaching in the Qur'an which dictates that a woman should veil her face. Dabbous explains that 'the Muslim religious dress code for women is derived from and referred to in just two qoranic verses: verse 31, Surah 24 (The Light); and verse 59, Surah 33 (The Clans)' (Dabbous 66) in which women are instructed that they should 'guard their modesty' and 'draw their veils over their bosoms'. Dabbous emphasizes that nowhere does it say that this veiling should take place across the face or that the hair should be covered (ibid). Therefore, it is not difficult to see how the Muslim tradition of veiling can be read as a supreme symbol of the masculine abuse (even corruption) which exists within *all* fundamentalist religion in which scriptures are wilfully "interpreted" in order to serve a patriarchal agenda. Certainly, this is the interpretation which is suggested within *SATC2* in its Karaoke sequence where Charlotte questions why the night club dancers are permitted to reveal their shoulders and cleavage in public. When Miranda replies that its some sort of religious 'loophole' which permits this activity within the confines of the hotel, Carrie responds with "Oh those clever, clever religious men."

However, it is hardly surprising that *SATC2*'s real interest in the politics of veiling is the issue of female sexuality – or, more precisely, the woman's right to a freedom of sexual expression. One of the thorny issues with reading Islam through the lens of Western feminism is that Islam configures feminine sexuality in a different way from Western (Christian) traditions. For example, the Christian concept of the tension between flesh and spirit is *not* a part of Islamic teachings and in the Qur'an there is no celebration of celibacy as the key to spiritual enlightenment as there is in, say, Roman Catholicism. Instead, Islam teaches that sexual desire on earth also serves God's plan in Heaven (see El Guindi 1999).

However, where the key difference lies is in the *configuration* of female sexuality. One of the most often cited scholars of Muslim traditions of veiling and feminine sexuality is Fatima Mernissi who points out that, while Western discourses represent female sexuality as *passive*, Islam views female sexuality as *active*. In this respect, what must be controlled in Islam is not sexuality itself but the body of the woman – 'the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder' (Mernissi 2011: 54).^{iv} This may well account for much of the anxiety the Western spectator has when s/he sees the veiled Muslim woman in that this veiled female is identified as 'an extreme sexual object by virtue of the fact that she is drawing ... attention to her covered

body' (Sala Al-Mahadin 2011: 10). One of the most influential of contemporary Western feminist scholars, Beverly Skeggs, has meticulously researched how Western patriarchal traditions have insisted that the "respectable" female body should be 'de-sexualised' (Skeggs 1997: 82) so that sexual modesty became the signifier of middle-class, hetero-femininity. Therefore, the representation of the actively desiring Muslim female body, whose sexuality is controlled *only* via veiling, is a terrifying image for many Western spectators. The Western assumption is that, opposed to the code of self-control and restraint required in the Western tradition, the Arab nations rely on imposed coverings of face / body and physical segregation of the sexes as would be necessary for animals during the mating season.

It is hardly surprising that this issue intrigues *SATC2*, given that the show's main political agenda has been the highly simplistic formulation that a woman's right to casual sex (and not forgetting clothes and shoes as well) is the key to liberation. While second wave feminism 'addressed the struggles women face in formulating their sexual desires and decolonising their sexuality from the "immense verbosity" of patriarchal discourses' (MacDonald 12), it seems that the type of postfeminism asserted in *SATC* is a simplified idea of liberation through the woman's ability to spend money on clothes, drinks cocktails and have (casual) sex. Therefore, it is only to be expected that Samantha – the most sexually voracious of the quartet – is the lead character in the Abu Dhabi sequences. Samantha is not the sexually passive woman of Western (Christian) traditions but rather *is* the fantasy figure of the sexually active woman of Islamic discourses. However, unlike her Arab "sisters" Samantha is not "condemned" to the tradition of veiling but is permitted free expression and consummation of her *varied* and non-monogamous desires. Therefore, the final confrontation sequence between Samantha and the Arab men in the Abu Dhabi souk, in which she screams at them that she has condoms because she engages in casual sex, is the incarnation of Islam's nightmare of the sexually voracious, active woman. Yet *SATC2* asserts that, unlike the repression of the Middle East, this freedom of sexuality is permitted in the US. The film's "happy ending" shows Samantha having sex on the bonnet of a jeep accompanied by Carrie's voice-over that such pornographied thrustings and grindings are possible because Samantha is now in the US - 'the land of the free'. In short, *SATC2* performs the same simplistic formulation of liberty in the Middle East that it has done throughout the series: namely that freedom of feminine sexual expression is *the* signifier of a progressive, tolerant culture. In doing so, it glosses over a myriad of socio-economic, religious and political differences in order to reduce the issue to a simplistic equation of women in contemporary Manhattan as liberated and women in the Middle East as oppressed.

The other issue of veiling to have inspired *SATC2*'s critique is, of course, the issue of feminine iconography given that *SATC*'s two themes have always been sex and fashion. Much Western anxiety about the veil is that it covers a free expression of femininity. These assumptions, of course, overlook constructionist views of gender and propose essentialist notions of a "natural" femininity. The suggestion is that, underneath the veil, there is the "natural" female body. However, this so called "natural" body of Western femininity is often just as "veiled" as the Muslim woman given that contemporary discourses of femininity demand a

considerable amount of 'labour' (Skeggs 1997) in the construction of the feminine. At the very least the contemporary female body is required to construct her femininity through wearing make-up if not also a regime of diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery. Is the Western, feminine face, which has been constructed with make-up and botox, any less "veiled" than the niqab wearing Muslim woman?

Therefore, the other discourse of veiling which is unsettling for the Western spectator is the paradoxical way in which the veil is deemed both oppressive but, paradoxically, also *liberating*. The argument that the veil is not oppression for women but freedom from the objectification of the patriarchal gaze has become particularly unsettling for Western spectators in a period of increased pornographication and sexualization of women's bodies. Would it be liberation for Muslim women to "free" them from the "captivity" of the veil only to have them subjected to the tyranny of the panoptic gaze (see Copjec 1989 and Bartky 1990) which regiments and judges women's appearances so that most women are now terrified to appear in public without full make-up?" Indeed, it is fair to say that the veil *may* be read as reversing the process of the panoptic gaze as it allows the woman to gaze upon and objectify everything she sees without herself becoming an object of the gaze (see Bailey and Tawadros 2003).

SATC2, however, offers as simplistic a view on this issue as it did with the subject of female sexuality. This idea of the "natural", uncovered female body, juxtaposed with the concealed, oppressed Muslim body, is represented in *SATC2* through the representation of Erin the Irish nanny. Irish Erin is yet another *SATC* stereotype (she speaks in a "top-of-the-mornin'-till-ye" type Irish accent) but, most importantly, is not only represented as free from the tyranny of make-up, and therefore a "natural" beauty, but is even liberated from the demands of having to wear a bra.



"Natural" Western femininity



Veiled, struggling-even-to-eat Muslim femininity

In *SATC2*'s terms, Erin is *the* "natural" female body and the film suggests that it would be the most terrible crime to conceal such sumptuous, feminine flesh from the world. Indeed, the

concept of the gaze, especially how veiling can be read as protection from willful objectification, is represented as irrelevant given that Erin's bouncing, bra-less breasts are the object of *everyone's* gaze – both men and women. Not only do Harry, Big and Steve gawk at Erin, tongues dangling from their mouth, but so does Samantha. Of course, in *SATC's* postfeminist utopia, this action is represented as completely harmless and unthreatening. The unashamed objectification of this woman's body is simple fun and does not demean a professional woman who has been employed because of her qualifications in child care. What *SATC2* is asserting in this sequence is that, in sophisticated Manhattan, there is no need to have Erin's body contained and protected through a process of veiling when it is located in a metropolitan environment filled with postfeminist, metrosexual men.^{vi}

Finally, where *SATC2* is arguably most offensive in its representation of the tradition of veiling is in the way it suggests that the protection afforded by a pair of sunglasses is comparable to the defence provided by veiling. Given that *SATC's* trajectory has always been an interrogation of gazing, asserting the woman's right to gaze and objectify (Jermyn 49), *SATC2* represents a pair of sunglasses as both facilitating this active female gaze and also offering female empowerment and defense from male harassment. This is exemplified in two key scenes in the film. First, in the poolside sequence, Carrie is intrigued by the Muslim woman whom she labels the 'real housewife of Abu Dhabi'. This woman is represented (and, in case we're not paying attention to the mise-en-scène, Miranda also tells us) as embracing Western traditions by wearing an ornate hijab, forgoing her niqab and clasping an expensive mobile phone in her well-manicured hands. In place of a niqab this woman wears a pair of opaque, black sunglasses. The sequence ends with Carrie feeling rather embarrassed that she has gazed upon this woman and objectified her in this fashion. The 'real housewife of Abu Dhabi' simply has to gaze at Carrie, her gaze filtered through the black lenses of sunglasses, to assume mastery of the gaze and objectify Carrie instead. This idea of sunglasses as empowerment is repeated later in the Abu Dhabi souk in which a rogue trader tries to sell Carrie and Miranda some knock-off merchandise. The man is unwilling to leave them alone and accept that they're not interested until Carrie gazes upon him through her lorgnette sunglasses and delivers a sharp 'no'. In this respect, *SATC2* may be read as asking who needs the hassle of hijab and niqab when sunglasses can do the trick?



The 1980s: Women as ‘Victims’ of both Fashion and Patriarchy

So far the argument has considered how *SATC2* has developed the Hollywood tradition of representing “evil” Arab culture through its particular focus on veiling and female sexuality. There is no doubt, in the ideology of *SATC2*, that Muslim women are oppressed and that the veil is the symbol of this oppression. Where *SATC2* moves one stage further – and, arguably, is at its most offensive – is in its representation of an entire country, with very different social, political and religious ideologies from the US, as “dated” 1980s culture.

SATC has always maintained a distinction between “vintage” (ie quality) and something which is “dated”. The film is rather unclear as to what actually qualifies as “vintage” but it certainly affirms that “vintage” is extremely desirable. In one scene, Charlotte shrieks hysterically at her daughter Lilly because the girl’s paint-splattered hands have ruined her “vintage” Valentino skirt. Assuming that a 6 year old child is supposed to understand the concept, Charlotte screeches at her daughter that ‘This skirt was vintage!’ Similarly, Carrie is perfectly happy that she and Big watch “vintage” films on their bedroom TV but extremely irritated when Big watches a more contemporary movie. Likewise, Michael Patrick King described how he wanted Stanford and Anthony’s wedding, themed in black and white, to resemble classic (vintage) Hollywood cinema.^{vii} In short, anything deemed “vintage” is the ultimate in desirability while something “dated” – and here it seems to be the 1980s which is coded as supremely “dated” – is both undesirable and bad taste.

The opening sequence of *SATC2* features a variety of flashbacks in which Carrie remembers when she met her three best friends. As I have argued elsewhere (2012), this sequence is remarkable within the canon of Hollywood for representing older women (indeed

women who, by Hollywood standards are deemed *ancient*) as more attractive now than they were over 20 years ago. As a 'fashion film' (Radner 2011), *SATC2* is asserting that the women's command of fashion (especially their development of individual styles) is the reason they look better now than they did two decades earlier.

This short introductory flashback sequence is important for asserting the film's viewpoint on two issues. First, the film suggests that the 1980s was a period in which women were not as empowered / liberated as they are in 2000s postfeminist, Manhattan culture. According to *SATC2*, the 1980s was a macho, misogynous culture (even in Manhattan) where women struggled even to walk along the street. The aggressive man who bumps into Miranda, knocking her papers and folders to the ground, hasn't even the decency to apologize to her let alone help her gather up the files; a psychotic car driver is prepared to run over Samantha and, even in the sequence where Carrie is with Charlotte (although there isn't any violence represented on screen) Carrie's voiceover narrates that she met Charlotte while a man was exposing himself to them on the subway.

Second, the film represents the 1980s as a decade of poor taste in which the women were slaves to the fashion trends. Talking about the fashions of the opening sequences, stylist Patricia Field described the women (especially Miranda) as 'ill dressed' while Sarah Jessica Parker (not employing the subtlety of Field) simply described the 1980s fashions as 'disastrous' (especially Carrie's *Flashdance* outfit) and asserted that all the women were 'victims' of the fashion trends.^{viii} Indeed, Miranda's suit and 1980s bowl haircut is little more than a sight-gag asking the spectator to giggle at 1980s iconography.



However, although the sequence is certainly making fun of 1980s fashion, the main difference is that these women have yet to develop their own sense of style and educated (read – ironic) consumption of fashion trends. They are, as Sarah Jessica Parker says, ‘victims’. The most obvious case here is Carrie who is simply copying a particular look (we see her emulating *Flashdance* and then Madonna) without her usual interrogation and playful reworking of the codes of fashion. As Pamela Church Gibson and Stella Bruzzi have argued, the excitement of Carrie’s iconography is that she is never simply a slave to fashion but always revises a particular look with an ironic twist – either through adding an item of “vintage” clothing to something contemporary or by employing something tawdry (her trademark is the fabric corsage) to a designer outfit (2004: 118-119). Indeed, it is the irony of Carrie’s wardrobe that denotes Manhattan sophistication.^{ix}

To summarize, the 1980s is remembered in *SATC2* as a decade in which the women were ‘victims’ both of fashion and of patriarchal culture. The film suggests that the 1980s are probably best forgotten and should only be remembered in order to stress the improvements that have been made since in both style and feminist rights – virtual synonyms in *SATC*’s brand of postfeminism. What the film then contends is that the characters’ trip to Abu Dhabi is a return to 1980s culture in which the style-less, *un-ironic* fashion is the metonym for a culture of sexism and brutal misogyny.

The *future* is Abu Dhabi? Or a 1980s timewarp?

After the premier of Smith Jarrod’s new film, *Heart of the Desert*, Sheikh Khalid (the film’s producer) tells Samantha that ‘Abu Dhabi is the future: a progressive, global city of commerce, culture and style: the new Middle East.’ Khalid then invites Samantha (and her three girlfriends) to be his guest on an all-expenses paid holiday in which she will have the chance to experience this progressive city of culture and *style*.

In accordance with narrative conventions, the trip to Abu Dhabi is simply the clichéd ‘holiday abroad’ of spin-off comedies.^x Yet the trip is also an assertion that Abu Dhabi is *both* incomprehensible “foreign” culture but also “fake” in that it is trying to emulate New York style. Abu Dhabi, however, is represented as lacking the necessary irony required to consume this culture and therefore only attains the level of sophistication found in 1980s Manhattan.

The first suggestion that the UAE is 1980s culture is the fact that it has produced Smith’s film - *Heart of the Desert*. Although the only representation of this film is its location shoot and publicity poster, the movie is coded as a hard-bodied, action film – the sort which was extremely popular in 1980s Hollywood (see Jeffords 1993 and Tasker 1993). 1980s action films are, on one level, a barrage of macho, misogynist, anti-feminist slogans, in which a man’s sheer physical strength wins the day and rescues the damsel in distress. Yet, they have also been *read* in ironic, queer fashions – not least by an awareness of how they construct homoerotic codes of gazing at hard bodies and impassioned man-on-man grappling. Given that the final image of Abu Dhabi

spice souk is the film poster of *Heart of the Desert*, the suggestion is that this genre of entertainment is very popular in the UAE. While this is certainly stressing how the UAE is celebrating American popular culture, but is about 20 years behind the times, it also suggests that the UAE residents are not “getting” the postmodern irony – especially the subtle homoerotic coding – of a film such as *Heart of the Desert*.



Hard bodies *and* hairspray on a shoot of *Heart of the Desert*. The suggestion is that this irony would be lost on the residents of Abu Dhabi.

Indeed, the sequence in which Sheikh Khalid is first introduced makes this clear when the Sheikh gives Smith a *very* affectionate pat on the leg (he actually rubs, if not even strokes, Smith's inner thigh) thus showing that the Sheikh has absolutely no awareness of how this action would be interpreted in contemporary Manhattan. The Sheikh is a symbol of the homosocial Arab world, in which homosexuality is not even acknowledged let alone identified, and so Smith's status as a homoerotic pin-up means absolutely nothing to him. While at this moment in the film, the Sheikh's naïve gesture appears charmingly innocent, it is also a warning that the UAE lacks an awareness of Manhattan's culture of free sexuality. As is often the case in *SATC*, the oppression of gay male sexuality is used as a metaphor for the constriction of female heterosexuality and vice versa (see Merck 2004). The suggestion is that a culture which does not even acknowledge homo-sexuality will not be any more permissive when it comes to expressions of female heterosexuality.

This conflation of gay male sexuality and female heterosexuality is further emphasized when the girls arrive in the Abu Dhabi hotel.^{xi} Carrie expresses her awe for the hotel's grandeur

by quoting the mantra of gay men ‘Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore’ while Samantha delivers another campy line when she admires the professional rugby players who are staying at the hotel and asks the manager if they’ve brought their balls with them. However, the hotel manager doesn’t even get the silly joke and interprets the question literally thus causing Charlotte to raise her eyebrows both in surprise at Samantha’s highly inappropriate pun but also in sheer amazement that the hotel manager did not understand the subtext. This pairing of unsanctioned female heterosexuality and illegal male homosexuality is further emphasized when Samantha is given a closeted gay butler - Abdul. Abdul, who (like the veiled Muslim women) doesn’t even seem to be permitted a voice in the UAE, is coded as gay by his interest in fashion and grooming (he is shown wearing a face mask at one point); his general effeminacy, and the look of desire when he sees the sexy Danish architect. However, unlike Samantha, Abdul stays closeted and asexual thus allowing him to survive in the UAE. Samantha, on the other hand, refuses to obey protocol and encounters extreme difficulties with the legal forces of Abu Dhabi (see next section).

However, where the film’s coding of UAE’s culture as 1980s American culture is made really explicit is in one of the key moments in the film where the girls perform a Karaoke version of Helen Reddy’s famous song *I am Woman* in the hotel night club. As Carrie points out at the start of the sequence, Karaoke in the US is ‘tired’ but here in the UAE it is seen as ‘fresh’. While the Karaoke trend swept the US in the 1980s (*Pioneer* was the technology company leading the way in Karaoke and it started marketing the first LD Karaoke machines in 1982) the implication is that this cultural trend has only just arrived in the UAE. ^{xii}

It is in this Karaoke sequence that the film makes its most explicit comment about the importance of ironic, camp appreciation and the relationship this holds to “sophisticated” culture. Karaoke has already taken place in the film in the context of Stanford and Anthony’s wedding where Liza Minnelli concluded the ceremony with a Karaoke performance of Beyonce’s *All the Single Ladies*. The featuring of Minnelli in this sequence is interesting on a number of levels. First, Liza (with a Z) Minnelli can be seen as one of the last remaining stars of Classic or “vintage” Hollywood not only because of her own performances but because her parents, Judy Garland and Vincent Minnelli, are considered the aristocracy of Classical Hollywood. In other words, Minnelli denotes a certain type of vintage quality – Hollywood Royalty. Therefore, when Minnelli performs a Karaoke song at the wedding, she is permitted to perform this activity because she has the standing of being one of the great Hollywood stars combined with the camp, self-reflexive awareness of the playful irony of the activity.

This earlier Liza Minelli Karaoke moment prefigures the later hotel Karaoke scene in which Carrie and the girls transpose a small segment of New York postfeminism - Carrie’s Cocktails and Manolos style of ironic, camp feminism – to a hotel in the Middle East. In keeping with the spirit of postmodern irony, with which Carrie and her girls perform the song, Samantha is attired in a dress which is an obvious 1980s pastiche and references the iconic style of *Dynasty* – especially in the overly embellished, American footballer size shoulders. In other words, Carrie

and her friends “get” that Karaoke is dated but as long as they understand that then it is fine to engage in the activity with an ironic wink.



The song they perform is Helen Reddy’s famous pop song ‘I am Woman’. This Song became a pop feminist anthem for women of the early days of second wave feminism (Perone 2004: 85). Indeed, even Betty Freidan, undeniably one of the most important figures in women’s liberation wrote that the song inspired a gathering of a group of women at the annual NOW convention (Freidan 1976: 257).^{xiii} In the *SATC*2 karaoke sequence, however, the song symbolizes the particular type of *SATC* postfeminism. First, the sequence demonstrates how *SATC*’s brand of postfeminism is building upon and developing the attainments of second wave feminism. This isn’t postfeminism as backlash / rejection of second wave but an awareness of the accomplishments of second wave. Yet, the seriousness associated with women’s liberation is removed given the overall sense of irony and playfulness of the sequence. Political power can be conveyed through girlish fun and capitalist consumption of luxury items and fashion.^{xiv}

What is rather telling, however, is that the sequence reproduces the event described by Freidan in that various women in the audience are so inspired by ‘I am Woman’ that they rise to their feet to join the celebration. Yet, unlike the original NOW moment, these women are conspicuously from different racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The scene edits to various people who are inspired by the song, including an African woman, whose African-ness is denoted by her clothes (this is *SATC* after all), rising to her feet in triumph and an Asian woman who lifts her arms in ecstatic celebration of the song’s lyrics.



The sequence also features another inspired woman who is coded if not so much as lower class (she is staying in one of the most expensive hotels in the world) but as lacking Manhattan sophistication. Again this lack of sophistication is denoted by her iconography (she is wearing an unflattering, frumpy dress and, by *SATC* standards of body fascism is “overweight”) and the way she spills her drink as she jumps to her feet in an undignified cheer.



Finally, in keeping with the sense of inclusivity suggested by *SATC*’s brand of postfeminism, the rugby players also join in with the song and interpret the line ‘I am strong’ as a chance to flex their biceps. The inclusion of these men, who are white, professional sports stars, and therefore hardly to be identified - by anyone’s standards - as an oppressed, minority group, is stressing *SATC*’s belief that the struggle is now over and equality has been attained. The addition of the rugby players, who are identified as sophisticated, metrosexual men, who flaunt their muscles to demonstrate their masculine beauty rather than their power, are the icing on the cake for *SATC*’s postfeminist “development” of the second wave. We may remember the song fondly but this anthem of women’s liberation is now relegated to the “dated” agenda of Karaoke. In other words, the 1980s Karaoke sequence, shows how Carrie and her friends have moved

beyond the oppression of 1980s culture and are now able to revisit it in an ironic fashion. Yet, while Carrie and her girlfriends interpret the song in an ironic, playful fashion, the other non-white women find it truly inspirational. The suggestion is that these other hotel guests have yet to attain Carrie and her friends' level of sophistication but are the naïve women that Carrie et al were in the 1980s. In this respect, the sequence affirms *SATC*'s co-option of second wave feminist politics into simple issues of style and consumerism. Carrie and the girls actually *bring* contemporary feminism to the masses through style and popular culture.

However, while the Karaoke sequence suggests 1980s culture in a playful "timewarp", the true horror of the 1980s returns in the final scene of the Abu Dhabi holiday. In this sequence Carrie and her friends find themselves in the Abu Dhabi souk where the men have lured them into a building and are trying to persuade Charlotte to buy a "stolen" (and non-"vintage") watch. When Carrie and the girls flee, the men mistake Samantha's Birkin handbag as one of theirs and chase after her, accusing her of having stolen their bag. In the souk outside, the men try to wrench Samantha's Birkin from her but only succeed in tearing the strap so that the bag's contents spill to the ground. It is here that we find the "nightmare" flashback to 1980s Manhattan culture although it is now Samantha, rather than Miranda, who is knocked to the ground by arrogant men and left scrabbling for her belongings on the pavement. (To be fair, the Abu Dhabi men do apologize for their action which is more than the Manhattan man did in the 1980s.) As Samantha is now, to quote Reddy's song, 'down there on the floor', the Arab men loom over her and become aware that condoms have spilled out of her purse onto the ground. It is now that full 1980s regression takes place as Samantha (usually the most composed of all group) struggles to her feet, screaming hysterically. Not only has Samantha's appearance regressed to her 1980s iconography (her hair has become frizzy in the humidity and her eyeliner has started to run) but, when the men start jostling her, she performs the action that she has only demonstrated in the 1980s flashback in which she gives the men the finger and screams 'bite me!'.



Samantha giving "the finger" in 1980s Manhattan



Regressing to the 1980s in Abu Dhabi

On one level, Samantha's action is the utmost disrespect – especially as this is Prayer Time. Yet, the narrative affirms that the women have found themselves in this embarrassing (and potentially threatening) situation because of the men who tried to sell them fashionable goods and, when they weren't interested, became aggressive and violent towards them. In other words, now that the women are in Abu Dhabi they have regressed to 1980s culture in which they are, yet again, 'victims' of *both* fashion items and patriarchal culture.

However, the sequence ends "happily" when the Abu Dhabi women invite Carrie and her friends into a secluded flower shop in which these Muslim women announce that they also love (Western) fashion^{xv} and are sporting contemporary (Western) designer outfits underneath their hijabs. The *SATC* theme of female friendship, in which women support each other, is shown to be universal - from Manhattan to the Middle East. Of course, this friendship can only be demonstrated when the Muslim women remove their veils as, up until this point, Carrie and her girlfriends had been unable to read the Abu Dhabi women, in both the airport and at the hotel pool, because of the hijab and niqab. In other words, *SATC2* is not merely asserting that the niqab is the symbol of patriarchal oppression of women's femininity and sexuality but that it also prevents female friendship and "feminist sisterhood" from happening. Most importantly, the Abu Dhabi women are blind consumers of fashion – reminiscent of the way Carrie and her friends were in the 1980s. Like Carrie, these women love New York *simply because* of the fashion – reminding the spectator of Carrie's opening line in *SATC1* where she explains that women come to New York looking for two things: 'labels and love'.^{xvi}

As can only be expected, Carrie and her friends manage to sneak past the mob of angry men by wearing hijabs and niqabs, thus affirming that these items of clothing really do make women silent, inconsequential and even invisible. Indeed, wearing the hijab means that Carrie is unable to hail a taxi (again a reference to the 1980s flashback as she never has trouble getting a cab in contemporary Manhattan) until she performs an action from a "vintage" Hollywood film *It Happened One Night*. This, of course, makes a taxi screech to a halt thus suggesting the axiomatic, cultural prestige of "vintage" American culture which only women like Carrie can command.

The final shot of Abu Dhabi is not the culture of the spice souk but a film poster of Smith Jerrod's *Heart of the Desert* pasted to a brick wall in the souk. The message is now clear: Abu Dhabi wants to embrace American culture but lacks the sophistication to consume this culture properly. Given that Smith, earlier in the film, asserted to the Sheikh that it was Samantha who was actually responsible for his success, the final shot of the film poster shows that Abu Dhabi is prepared to accept the style of the USA but has absolutely no awareness of the gender and sexuality politics that have created this style. The UAE may want the film but not the person who, according to Smith, was actually responsible for the film: Samantha.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *SATC2* not only reproduces many Hollywood prejudices and stereotypes of Arab culture but develops this through a suggestion that the 'new Middle East' is comparable to the level of "sophistication" evidenced in 1980s Manhattan. In this respect, the film is offensive on so many levels and it is hardly surprising that it was voted the worst film of the year and received several Razzie awards. Most reviewers were appalled by the film and slightly saddened that the witty, sharply paced series had been reduced to such a 'bloated mess of a movie' (O'Hehir, 2010).

Arguably, what is most upsetting is the way the film brushes over the socio-political realities and religious identifications of the UAE women to suggest that an embrace of postfeminist sisterhood, fashion and US pop culture, can facilitate female liberation. *SATC2* suggests that if only the Abu Dhabi Muslim women could shed their hijabs, to reveal the contemporary Western fashion underneath, then they could truly start the emancipation of women that was beginning in 1980s Manhattan. It is hardly surprising that *SATC2* has been banned in a number of countries – not least the UAE itself (Kantaria 2010).

I want to end with some thoughts on one final image from *SATC2* that has haunted me ever since I first saw the film. After the Birkin handbag altercation, Carrie and her friends are retreating to the impromptu Harem of the flower shop where they see an elderly Muslim woman seated outside the flower shop.



This elderly florist is represented as having some facial hair on her upper lip and chin. On one level this body is the incarnation of Samantha's nightmarish Ghost of Christmas Future given

that, when Samantha's HRT was removed at the airport, she started worrying that she would grow a beard without her prescription medications. Yet, the most important signifier in this shot is that this woman is *not* veiled thus suggesting that, in Middle Eastern culture, this older female body is no longer even recognizable as "woman". There is no need for a veil as she is not only deemed to be unattractive but past any expressions of desire herself. Most notably, this woman is not part of the sisterhood within the flower shop but is left outside – all alone. Given that *SATC*'s theme has been its assertion of the right of the older woman to be both sexually desirable and desiring, while part of a supportive sisterhood, the representation of this isolated body is the ultimate signifier that Carrie and the girls should be thankful they live in Manhattan and not the Middle East.

Yet, for me, this image of "the bearded lady" brought back memories of the theme of "freak" shows and enfreakment that I investigated in my last monograph (2010). The subject of the "freak" has been a key motif in the *SATC* series (Greven 2004). However, in the series it has always been the white, middle-class, heterosexual male who has been represented as a "freak". In this respect, the spectator has not felt any guilt about laughing at a body which holds the position of power in patriarchal culture. On no occasion in the *SATC* series have (white) female bodies been represented as "freaks". In Abu Dhabi, however, there is no such luxury for its female citizens. If young, heterosexual women are "victims" of both fashion and patriarchy, at least they claim the identification of being "woman". *SATC2* suggests that, in Abu Dhabi, an elderly woman, past the stage of heterosexual desirability and child-bearing, is left with only the identification of a "freak" show exhibit.

This fleeting image stresses one of the most uncomfortable issues of *SATC2*'s postfeminist Islamophobia. Until this image in the film it could have been argued that, *at the very least*, *SATC2* *did* actually consider the *personal* issues of Muslim women rather than, as other discourses have done, simply co-opt these women as an agenda to justify Islamophobia and aggression against the Middle East. In this sequence, however, we find the cruelest form of enfreakment in which this anonymous, isolated body is simply mobilized as a metaphor for the "them versus us" binary. While Carrie and her friends may well have tried to bring Karaoke postfeminism to the Middle East, thus allowing them to forge a postmodern "sisterhood" with other well-to-do, fashion oriented Muslim women, they simply stroll past the older, anonymous, unfashionable women without saying a single word.

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ⁱ SATC's postfeminism is often classist and racist. For example, in *SATC1*, Carrie's African-American assistant – Louise from St Louis – rents a designer bag in order to have the status symbol. The suggestion is that Carrie would never have done anything like that and, if she couldn't afford the original bag, would have hunted the thrift shops and vintage retail stores to find an alternative.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Mitu Sengupta <http://www.counterpunch.org/2010/06/18/sex-the-city-and-american-patriotism/> (last accessed 12/05/2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ Sebastian Smee, *The Telegraph* (2006). Available online <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606484/Viewfinder-New-Freedom-2006.html> (last accessed 15/05/2014).

^{iv} Recently, Mernissi's theories have been the subject of some criticism from a number of more anthropologically focused feminist scholars – most notably Katherine Bullock (2003) – who have stressed the importance of engaging with *situated* practices of veiling.

^v The panopticon is a prison system in which an amphitheatre of cells are under the constant surveillance of the central warden's tower. The idea is that the prisoners will internalise the warden's gaze and become their own self-

policing subject. This prison system is often read as a metaphor for the gaze of contemporary culture which regiments body image and, as such, is gendered. As Joan Copjec famously argued, 'the panoptic gaze defines *perfectly* the situation of the woman under patriarch' (1989: 54, original emphasis).

^{vi} The suggestion is that Irish Erin (unlike her "unfortunate" Muslim "sisters") has been "liberated" from the tyranny of religious Ireland through her move to "land-of-the-free" Manhattan – especially given the revelation at the end of the film that Erin is lesbian identified. (Of course, *SATC2* was produced before the famous Irish referendum on same-sex marriage (May 2015) which made the Western world realise that "religious" Ireland may not be quite so oppressive as was once assumed.)

^{vii} Interviews on *Sex and the City: The Movie 2* DVD extras section

^{viii} Interviews on *Sex and the City: The Movie 2* DVD extras section.

^{ix} This was one of the key motifs in *SATC1* in which the opening sequence represented Carrie's dress, which had a ridiculously huge corsage, being admired by four other women (younger versions of Carrie and her friends) who got the joke and understood the playful irony of Carrie's wardrobe.

^x The holiday abroad motif is a fairly standard trope in spin-off movies – especially comedy shows in which the relocation of the characters to a "foreign" environment can give their particular comedic quirks a novel twist. *SATC2* rather shamelessly replicates a number of the comedic strategies that it employed in *SATC1*'s Mexico sequence – not least how Charlotte's body is the source of much physical comedy. Although Charlotte doesn't suffer the indignity of diarrhoea on this holiday she does fall off a camel and has to mince across the desert in stiletto heels. Many critics were disappointed with *SATC2*'s level of juvenile comedy which resorted to physical antics and *Carry-On* style innuendos – a far cry from the TV series' sophisticated 'fast-paced chatter' (Jermyn 36). In one toe curling sequence, Samantha actually points out that her latest fancy is called Dick Spurt and then identifies him as 'Lawrence of my Labia'.

^{xi} It is hardly surprising that the UAE did not permit the filming of *SATC2* and so the hotel and Abu Dhabi souk sequences were shot in Morocco.

^{xii} The technology motif appears later in the film when Samantha complains that 'Abu Dhabi is so *cutting edge* in so many ways and so backward when it comes to sex'. The idiom "Cutting Edge" became popular in the 1980s to describe advancements in computer technology.

^{xiii} Freidan described when, at an evening of the NOW annual convention, *I am Woman* was played and "women got out of their seats and started dancing.....and singing, 'I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman.' It was a spontaneous, beautiful expression of the exhilaration we all felt in those years, women really moving as women" (Freidan 1976: 257).

^{xiv} The sequence also gives a double signification to *I Am Woman* given that Reddy was criticised by a number of (Marxist) feminists for enjoying the royalties of the song's success in a conspicuous fashion (see Rodnitzky 2004: 61). It's also worth noting that the song is suggestively Pro-America given that Reddy herself advised any aspiring singer/songwriters to move to the USA as there were little or no opportunities elsewhere.

^{xv} The flower shop women simply use the term "fashion" to mean Western fashion. The suggestion is that there actually is no fashion in the UAE.

^{xvi} As Pamela Church Gibson points out (2012: 110), the 'labels' are cited first, thus suggesting that they are much more important than 'love', and this is certainly the case with the Abu Dhabi women whom, the spectator should infer, are trapped in loveless marriages with the men who have been represented in the souk outside.